

The Bahá'í Faith and its World Community

Introduction

The Bahá'í Faith is an independent world religion with adherents in virtually every country. The Bahá'í world community includes almost all nationalities, classes, trades and professions. Its membership of over five million is comprised of people living in approximately 127,380 localities in over 200 countries and territories—189 of these independent nations—and unites men and women of various religious and ethnic origins. More than 2,100 ethnic groups and tribes are represented.

Bahá'í Writings

The writings that guide the life of the Bahá'í community include numerous works by Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, and interpretations by His son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Bahá'u'lláh's great-grandson, Shoghi Effendi. Bahá'í literature can be read today in over 800 languages and dialects.

Bahá'í Principles

The central principles of the Bahá'í Faith are the oneness of God, the oneness of religion, and the oneness of mankind. Bahá'u'lláh taught that divine revelation is a continuous and progressive process and that the missions of the messengers of God represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of human society. Bahá'ís believe that humanity is one family created by God. The Bahá'í community promotes the unity of mankind and the establishment of peace in the world. The teachings of the Bahá'í Faith provide solutions to problems which have been barriers to the achievement of unity and peace.

Characteristics of the Bahá'í Community

There is no clergy in the Bahá'í Faith. Local meetings are planned by the local Bahá'í communities. Bahá'í meetings include devotional services, study classes, discussions, social events, and the observance of holy days. The institutions and programs of the Bahá'í Faith are supported exclusively by voluntary contributions from its own members. Bahá'í religious and community activities are planned according to the Bahá'í calendar. The Bahá'í Faith began in 1844 and each new calendar year begins on the vernal equinox. The Bahá'í year includes nine holy days and a period of fasting near the end of the year. For Bahá'ís the purpose of human life is to know and worship God, and carry forward a ever-advancing civilization. Bahá'ís have, for over one hundred years, striven to bring about the unity of mankind, world peace, and world order. To achieve these goals the Bahá'í teachings encourage:

1. The fostering of a good character and the development of spiritual qualities, such as honesty, trustworthiness, compassion, and justice. Prayer, meditation, and work done in the spirit of service to humanity are expressions of worship of God.

2. The eradication of prejudices of race, class, nationality, and sex. Racism retards the unfoldment of the boundless potentialities of its victims, corrupts its perpetrators, and blights human progress. Recognition of the oneness of mankind, implemented by appropriate legal measures, must be universally upheld if prejudice is to be overcome.

3. The achievement of a dynamic coherence between the spiritual and practical requirements of life on earth. There are spiritual principles or values by which solutions can be found for every social problem. The essential merit of a spiritual principle is that it not only presents a perspective which harmonizes with that which is immanent in human nature, it also induces an attitude, a dynamic, a will, an aspiration, which facilitate the discovery and implementation of practical measures.

4. The development of the unique talents and abilities of each individual. Through the pursuit of knowledge, the acquisition of skills for the practice of a trade or profession and participation in community life both the individual and society as a whole are enriched.

5. The equality of women and men. The denial of such equality perpetrates an injustice against one half of the world's population and promotes in men harmful attitudes and habits that are carried from the family to the workplace, to political life, and ultimately to international relations.

6. The cause of universal education. Ignorance is indisputably the principle reason for the decline and fall of peoples and the perpetuation of prejudice. No nation can achieve success unless education is accorded to all its citizens.

Bahá'í Laws

Besides spiritual laws requiring daily prayer and an annual period of fasting, the Bahá'í Faith has social laws. It prescribes monogamy and upholds the importance of chastity. Marriage is conditional upon the consent of both parties and their parents. Divorce is discouraged in the Bahá'í community and the Bahá'í law requires a year of trial separation, after which, if differences cannot be resolved, divorce is permissible. Bahá'í law also prohibits the use of alcoholic drinks and narcotics.

Non-Partisan Character

The Bahá'í Faith is not aligned with any government or political party. While they may accept nonpartisan government posts and appointments, Bahá'ís may not be members of any political faction or ideology. Bahá'ís, both individually and collectively, are enjoined to obey the laws of their respective states and the authority of the legally constituted governments under which they live. Without regard for political affiliation, Bahá'ís may vote in general elections and participate in the ordinary civic life of their community.

Bahá'í Administrative Order

Free from any form of ecclesiasticism, having neither priesthood nor man-made ritual, and forbidding asceticism, monasticism, and mendicancy, the Bahá'í Faith relies on a pattern of local, national, and international administration, created by Bahá'u'lláh, elaborated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and implemented by Shoghi Effendi. There are approximately 11,740 local assemblies and 182 National Spiritual Assemblies throughout the world.

The affairs of the local Bahá'í community are administered by a nine-member local Spiritual Assembly elected annually. Nationally, a nine-member body is elected each year by delegates who have in turn been elected by Bahá'ís at the local level. The international governing body, the Universal House of Justice is elected once every five years in Haifa, Israel at an international convention attended by members of the National assemblies. All Bahá'í elections are by secret ballot, with no nominations or electioneering.

In administering the affairs of the community, the institutions of the Bahá'í Faith practice a form of consultation that involves full and frank discussion of issues under consideration. Matters are discussed with a desire to ascertain the facts and to come to a decision that is based on spiritual principles and is unencumbered by personal attachment to point of view. The Bahá'í writings state: "The shining spark of truth comes forth only after to clash of differing opinions." While the goal of consultation is unanimous agreement upon a course of action, when unanimity cannot be reached, a vote is taken, and the decision of the majority prevails.

Houses of Worship

The central position of prayer and meditation in Bahá'í individual and community life places emphasis on houses of worship in villages, towns, and cities. At present, Houses of Worship exist in Wilmette, Illinois, USA; Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany; Kampala, Uganda; Sydney, Australia; Panama City, Panama; New Delhi, India; and Apia, Western Samoa. Services of worship consist of the recitation of Bahá'í scriptures and scriptures of the other divinely revealed religions and "a capella" music is also allowed. Eventually each locality will have its own house of worship, which will serve as the point around which the scientific, educational, humanitarian, and administrative institutions of the Bahá'í community revolve. Many local Bahá'í communities currently own properties used for activities.

Social and Economic Development Projects

Bahá'í communities throughout the world are involved in social and economic development activities that serve the needs of local populations.

National Spiritual Assemblies currently manage over

600 development projects. The majority of the projects are the result of grassroots efforts operating with little or no outside support.

Activities in health and social services, communications, agriculture and forestry, and community development encourage work in the spirit of service to mankind. The emphasis in Bahá'í teachings on the necessity of universal education has inspired the establishment of more than 900 tutorial schools and training centers in Africa, Asia and the Americas. Bahá'í communities operate over 30 formal primary and secondary schools.

Social and economic development projects world-wide also include medical centers, programs for women, cooperative savings programs, building renovation, arts and theater groups, communal farms and cooperative fishing projects, homes for refugees and for the aged, and computer education to assist low income families.

Bahá'í History

The Bahá'í Faith was founded in Persia (Irán) by Mirzá Husayn-'Alí (1817-1892), known as Bahá'u'lláh, the "Glory of God". The word Bahá'í derives from bahá ("glory" or "splendor") and means a follower of Bahá'u'lláh. The Bahá'í Faith is linked with the Báb'í Faith, founded in 1844 by Mirzá 'Ali-Muhammad (1819-1850) known as the Báb or "Gate". The Báb announced that He was not only the founder of an independent religion, but the herald of a new and far greater prophet or messenger of God, Who would usher in an age of peace for all mankind. The Báb was publicly executed by Persian authorities in 1850 in an attempt to crush His religion. In 1863, Baha'u'llah declared that He was the one prophesied by the Báb.

Bahá'u'lláh was exiled from Irán to various places within the Ottoman Empire, and in 1868 was sent as a prisoner to the fortress city of 'Akká in Palestine. He passed away in 1892. In His will, He appointed His eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921), to lead the Bahá'í community and to interpret the Bahá'í Writings. 'Abdul-Bahá in turn appointed His eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi (1896-1957), as His successor, the Guardian of the Cause, and the authorized interpreter of Bahá'í teachings. Today the affairs of the world-wide Bahá'í community are administered by the Universal House of Justice.

Bahá'í World Administrative Center

The Bahá'í World Center is in the Holy Land. From the time of Bahá'u'lláh's exile to 'Akká in 1868, the spiritual and administrative center of the Faith has been established in the two cities of 'Akká and Haifa. The Bahá'í Holy Places in Israel consist of the Shrines of Bahá'u'lláh and The Báb and historic sites associated with Them. Bahá'u'lláh instructed that the World Center of His Faith should be in the vicinity of these Shrines. The Seat of the Universal House of Justice is Located on Mt. Carmel in Haifa, Israel.